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LBI residents air anxieties at beach project meeting

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LONG BEACH TOWNSHIP-Louise Sonnenberg told state and federal officials that she signed an agreement granting them access to her beachfront property for the island's beach-replenishment project without consulting a lawyer.

"And I'm feeling a little bit uneasy about that," Sonnenberg said during a lengthy and combative question and answer session about the project. "My question is, how do I null and void my easement?"

A crowd of hundreds who had packed St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church in Brant Beach cheered Sonnenberg.

A state Department of Environmental Protection official said they would give it back.

The information session held by the DEP and representatives of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers did little to answer questions skittish residents like Sonnenberg had about beach easements and public access points that are required for the project to commence.

If anything, the meeting appeared to make residents who would be affected by the project even more apprehensive to sign the agreement.

The DEP and Army Corps has asked about 800 beachfront-property owners to sign an easement granting them access to the beach during the replenishment project. The DEP also requires public access points, with bathrooms and parking lots in some locations, to the beach every quarter-mile.

North Beach and Loveladies are the areas that need the access points most, officials said.

Officials began the meeting with a slide presentation on the project, which aims to protect the vulnerable barrier island from hurricanes and other storms. The "incidental purpose" of the project is to provide recreation benefits, including the public access points, said Keith Watson, project manager for the Army Corps.

The recommended plan calls for the installation and cyclical replenishment of a 17-mile-long dune, rising 22 feet above sea level, from Loveladies in the north to Holgate in the south. Barnegat Light is not slated to receive any sand.

The project began in November in Harvey Cedars, and officials said they would start again in Surf City and Ship Bottom in the spring.

The project will go on 24 hours per day at each construction site, officials said.

The initial cost of the project is estimated to be about \$71 million. The total cost estimate of the project, including repair of the beaches every seven years for 50 years, is about \$118 million. The federal government is funding 65 percent of the project. Of the remaining 35 percent, the DEP will pay three-quarters. The municipalities will cover the remaining costs.

But it was the beach access points and their locations that the audience was most concerned about.

New Jersey Deputy Attorney General Dean Jablonski told the riled-up crowd that the state has an obligation, supported by the state Supreme Court, to provide access points to the beach.

But what stirred the crowd most was when Jablonski said property owners could be held liable should an accident occur on the public access point through their property.

One by one, forming a line from the middle of the church to its rear door, residents took turns asking for concrete answers about how the requirements would affect their taxes, their property values, their views of the ocean and their liability should someone injure themselves at the new public access points.

"I have several questions, and in listening to you, we haven't gotten any direct answers," said Dr. Harris Vernick, of North Beach. "Which homes in North Beach ... are going to have public access ... on the side of their home? You did not tell us what the impact on future taxes would be. You didn't explain liability."

Jablonski, whom one resident later called "flippant," struggled to explain liability, which he said "unfortunately defies clear rules and clear guidelines."

"I'm trying to think of a common sense example," Jablonski said. "You leave a rake out on the public sidewalk, someone comes over and trips over it. There's a good chance you're going to be held negligible. It's a very nebulous" concept.

The locations of the quarter-mile access points have not been determined, said Dave Rosenblatt, administrator of the DEP's Office of Construction and Engineering. Rosenblatt said Long Beach Township has submitted a proposal outlining possible locations for access points, but that they are not close enough together.

"Probably the primary reason I have oceanfront property is that I can look out my kitchen, my living room, and see the ocean," said Mike Logan, of Brant Beach. A dune "22 feet high totally destroys the value of my property and destroys my reason for even being here."

Watson, project manager for the Army Corps, said the 22-foot dune elevation was arrived at after exhaustive investigation over many years.

Time and again, residents berated the officials.

"I think you gentlemen came unprepared," said Dorothy Jedziniak, of Ship Bottom.

Officials frequently struggled to maintain order at the meeting as members of the audience abandoned the question and answer format and shouted questions at them.

"We're doing this project for Long Beach Island," Watson said. "Not for us."

While some might be concerned about their view of the ocean, they should also be concerned about protecting their home from hurricanes, said Jeff Sagnip Hollendonner, a spokesman for U.S. Rep. James Saxton, R-3rd, who has championed the project for years.

"When you're talking about people's property, they care a lot about it and they should," Hollendonner said. "But shore protection is needed. ... If the Army Corps tells us we need a 22-foot

(elevated) dune, that's something you should consider. They are engineers."

Don Sposato, of Ship Bottom, said he agreed in principle with the project, but that the state should be more flexible in their requirements for public access.

"What they're trying to do is great," Sposato said after the meeting. "It's how they're going about it. If they were more flexible, 99 percent of the people would sign the easement."

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